



State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

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Improving Women's Electoral Chances through an Evidence-Based Approach: Metrics of Success — Improving Women's Electoral Prospects

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This is the fourth In Brief of a series of eight developed as background papers for a three-day workshop titled 'Improving women's electoral chances through an evidence-based approach', hosted by the Centre for Democratic Institutions and the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program at the Australian National University in Canberra, June 2016. The In Briefs are designed to accompany the [workshop synthesis report](#).

What does it take to be a successful candidate in Melanesia? Getting elected in the region has historically been challenging. Candidates face intense local competition and retaining office once elected can be difficult. For women, getting elected has proven particularly difficult. There is a widespread misconception that 'women have equal chance to run for office and participate in decision-making but this is not accurate. There are numerous institutional, cultural, attitudinal and financial barriers' (Tavola 2014:1) which women candidates must necessarily overcome. Nevertheless, there is one common challenge all candidates face when running for office: presenting themselves as a credible candidate capable of delivering services to their local electorate once elected. Understanding what factors, if any, have been common to electoral success, and how successful candidates win, is an important first step if we are to provide support that empowers women. What do successful candidates — male and female — look like? Are there common factors that underpin successful election campaigns? Can these be replicated?

Getting Elected — What Do Successful Men Look Like?

A key question is the degree to which successful candidates are representative of the broader communities in which they live. Corbett and Wood (2013) show for Solomon Islands that successful male parliamentarians are getting

older, are better educated than most of the population, have tended to work in the formal economy (traditionally in the civil service but increasingly in the private sector) and have spent time working in the urban capital. While party affiliations have made little difference in getting elected in Melanesia, having a broad multisited support base and strong relational ties to voters through a range of clan, kinship and civil society — particularly church — groups is necessary for success. Candidate prospects are also improved when communities have confidence candidates are likely to deliver services and respond to local needs when elected. As such, having constructive and long-term connections with local constituents is important in building broader trust and support. Successful candidates are also effective in mobilising resources to consolidate local support, including, increasingly, by the effective deployment of constituency funding.

Getting Elected — What Do Successful Women Look Like?

While the experience of successful male candidates is relevant to women also, women face a range of additional, and significant, obstacles when running for office. While few women have been elected to formal office at the national level, several have come close and more have been elected at subnational level. What does the experience of successful women tell us? Reviewing the limited evidence base, Haley and Zubrinich (2015) note that women who perform well at the polls are characterised by a number of features:

- they are typically community based, have strong local connections with their constituents and are deeply embedded in their electorates
- they enjoy the support of strong coalitions built upon a constituency base, and typically have secured the support of key leaders within the community. In

particular, successful women candidates tend to have strong male backers (Haley and Zubrinich 2013)

- they often come from prominent families and/or have built a public profile through their community work
- they have built reputations as being effective local representatives. Being able to show they can deliver benefits to voters is important and successful women candidates have demonstrated this in a variety of ways including through significant involvement in the church, serving the community or delivering benefits locally.

Women candidates have also benefited from institutional measures at the subnational level. To date, it has proven more politically feasible to secure measures at this level, although support for women candidates has often been focused at the national level. Women candidates have benefited from institutional measures in Bougainville, Vanuatu and to a lesser extent in Papua New Guinea.

Implications

Successful candidates enjoy local credibility, have significant support bases that straddle a range of local groups and can convincingly claim they will be able to deliver benefits to local supporters. While there is no guarantee any candidate will perform well in a local electoral context, it seems reasonable to conclude that to improve ones' electoral chances, aspiring candidates should to some degree look like the above profile.

Understanding what successful candidates who have won elections in the Pacific look like, and what they did to win, should be the starting point for the development of better-targeted forms of support. Some of the factors identified above cannot be readily replicated because they will be intrinsic to certain individuals, for example familial connections. But others might be more readily supported, such as providing assistance for local coalition building. A key implication of identifying the metrics of success will be in candidate identification and the targeting of support towards women more likely to win elections.

Author Notes

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